Sinking Ships

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Sinking Ships

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Summary

After a mission goes awry and lands Charmy in the hospital, guilt and shame makes Espio question his role on the team. As the urge to prove himself as a worthy member deepens, Espio begins to spiral into a world of disordered eating.

Ninjas are invisible— and soon enough, he will be too.
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The first time Espio felt the need to be less was after a mission went wrong.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

1.

The first time Espio felt the need to be less was after a mission went wrong.

It had started out simple— so suspiciously simple— that he could barely remember what the original investigation was. Something about a stolen bracelet, maybe a watch, but it wasn't dwelling on Espio's mind.

Charmy getting hurt to the point of hospitalization was.

It had been such a foolish calculation on Espio's part, allowing for them all to split up. Charmy had been so eager when he had agreed, eyes brightening like Christmas lights. It was the quickest way out of there with so much ground to cover, and Espio had completely missed the mobians waiting to ambush them.

In the end, Charmy had suffered the greatest. The sight burned itself into his eyelids, his mind-- Vector rushing into the common area, eyes laser-focused, a tremble in his breath. A bloody Charmy lying limp in his arms.

A grade one concussion, one baby tooth gone, a few days of mandatory bed-rest, and a very, very unhappy bee, but he was going to be okay. After the doctor had assured them for the umpteenth time that the overnight stay was just a precaution, Vector had looked at Espio with exhausted eyes and said "Go get some rest, Es."

And, of course, he had promptly responded, "Absolutely not."

It had taken nearly ten minutes of pleading and bargaining for Espio to finally agree to go home, albeit under the pretense that Vector would call him as soon as Charmy opened his eyes. He had dragged his feet all the way home before sitting himself down at the dark, empty kitchen table.

It wasn't like this was the first time they had investigated themselves into danger, nor was it the first time Charmy got hurt on a mission, but the violent shaking of his hands told that this was different.

This had been Espio's fault.

Careless. How could he have been so careless? Ninjas hid in the shadows and mapped out their attackers without leaving a trace. Espio was a bull in a china shop. Honorable wasn't anywhere close to his status, and it wouldn't be long until everyone started catching on.

Espio slammed his fist on the table, gritting his teeth. Somewhere along the way he had lost his shame, had gotten too comfortable. Well, not anymore. From now on, his focus would be unbreakable, his discipline would be unshakable, and he would be invisible. He wouldn't just be a good ninja— he'd be the teammate Vector and Charmy deserved.

Espio made his way to his room to meditate, ignoring the gnawing at his stomach.

2.

"Espio, man, I love you, but you cannot drink that on an empty stomach."

Vector's voice rounded the corner so casually confident that Espio jumped, nearly spilling the orange contents in his cup. Espio steadied himself, willing the shame to bubble back down. "Well, good morning, Vector. I didn't expect you to be up so early." And to be completely honest, he had not. The reason he had even made the drink was because he hadn't expected Vector to be up for at least another hour. Another skill he needed to sharpen, he noted.

"Yeah, me neither. I kept tossing and turning all night. 'Was like something just didn't want me to fall asleep, y'know?" Vector shrugged, focusing back on the chameleon. "Why are you drinking that stuff anyway? I thought we threw it away a while back."

Espio mentally cursed himself for not being more time conscientious, fighting to keep his scales purple instead of an embarrassed red. He fiddled with the spoon, clinking it on the glass. "It is good for digestive health. We likely don't get enough fiber in our diet as it is." And that was probably true. The cheap pizza and cup noodles couldn't be doing them any favors.

Vector looked like he was actually considering that one. "Yeah, you're probably right. All I know for sure is that it, uh, y'know, makes you have to..."

Espio stirred faster. "I am very aware of the... aftereffects, Vector."

"Just saying! 'Sides, you gotta eat something first. That'll run right through you."

God, why couldn't Vector leave him alone? Had he really been so dishonorable that he couldn't trust Espio to feed himself? "I've already eaten."

Vector raised an eyebrow with a small laugh. "Already ate? Es, it's only six o'clock __"

"I know what time it is, Vector!" Espio snapped, grabbing his cup off the counter. "And if it's alright with you, I'd like to finish my drink."

Vector backed up with wide eyes, hands in the air. "Alright, alright! Just don't make yourself sick."

Espio stormed out of the kitchen and back to his room, bringing the liquid to his lips. It wasn't that he wanted to lie to Vector, but the crocodile had backed him into a corner. Besides, he'd probably have breakfast later; his stomach would have trouble processing it so early.

As the chalky, orange substance made its way into his empty stomach, Espio sighed, head feeling just a little bit lighter. It'd be fine— he'd just have to be sneakier when he got his second glass.

3.

Embarrassment and anger swirled in Espio's gut as he slowly moved around his spoon. He could feel their stares piercing into him, picking him apart, judging him. They were all judging him.

Vector cleared his throat across the kitchen table, disbelief written in his tone. "Are you... not feeling well?"

Espio gripped his spoon tighter, forcing words through gritted teeth. "I feel perfectly fine. I appreciate your concern, but it is misplaced."

Something about Vector's dumbfounded expression made Espio want to leap across the table. Actually, he had been much quicker to anger in recent days, frequently forcing himself to his room to meditate in fear he might say something he'd regret. A little concerning, but it did nothing to extinguish the rising flame as Vector went to argue back. "Then why—"

"Why the heck are you eating that!?" Charmy interrupted, voice muffled with food. He made an erratic gesture to Espio's meal. "No offense, Espio, but pizza tastes way better than that."

"Charmy, we've talked about this! Heck is a bad word— and no standing at the kitchen table!" Vector scolded as Charmy dramatically flopped in his seat. His expression softened as he looked back at Espio. "But the kid's got a point. You could eat all of that in two minutes if you tried, no way that's filling you up. How come you're eating side dishes when there's pizza sitting in front of you?"

Espio grimaced, mind running a mile a minute. It had been two weeks since he had dedicated himself to improving, and everyday provided a challenge of its own. It seemed like Vector was following his every move, calculating when every meal began, and how much of it was

completed. Everyday was a complex game of 20 questions, and if he gave the wrong answer about breakfast, Vector was shoving him a bowl. It didn't help that he lived with the loudest, most opinionated six-year-old on the planet.

Still, he had done a pretty good job at dodging outright confrontation until today. It wasn't like he was trying to stick out, but they had ordered takeout yesterday. One day was okay, but two was a pattern. And he couldn't afford patterns.

Espio sucked in a breath, putting on his best poker face. "I had a lot to eat yesterday and most of it was unhealthy. It's a good idea to give yourself a break from all the sodium." Espio forced down a grape, not bothering to look at Vector.

Vector gave a maddening chuckle and Espio bit his tongue. "I don't feel like it was that bad, but sure. Still, you can't just... not eat. I mean, what is that— a teaspoon of miso soup?"

A cup and a half, actually, and it wasn't like that was his whole meal. He had seaweed, grapes, and was planning on having yogurt for dessert. He wasn't sure why Vector was so hellbent on the topic, unless... unless he had been eating so much before that this portion size was unfathomable. Vector thought that he was sick because there was no possible way he could limit himself otherwise. Vector thought Espio didn't have control.

Well, he could fix that.

Espio crunched a piece of seaweed between his teeth, allowing the salty taste to coat his tongue. "I assure you, Vector, this is just in response to what I ate yesterday. My meals will be back to normal tomorrow. I may even have another meal later."

And, though hesitantly, Vector let him off the hook. The specifics of his response, Charmy rambling about his day— it wasn't all that important. What mattered was that Espio was one step closer to Vector seeing how disciplined he could be. How useful he truly was.

And if he happened to forget his yogurt in the fridge, even better.

4.

Espio yanked the cover over his head, shivering at the breeze it produced. "Please find something else to do, Charmy."

Charmy's hands pulled at the blanket, voice hyper and undeterred. "I've already colored, danced, sanged, played dress-up, tried make-up on Vector, flown around the house two million times, and a whole bunch of other stuff. I want to play with you!" He gave a particularly rough tug to the cover. "Please, please, please, please, please..." Espio allowed the voice to fade into the background as he shut his eyes.

Pathetic. It was the most fitting word he could find; he was truly, utterly pathetic.

Vanilla's birthday had been 2 days ago, and everything had gone off without so much as a stumble. The decorations stayed up the entire time, nearly half the city had shown up, and Vanilla hadn't known a thing until she entered the backyard. It was amazing— except for the food.

He had tried to keep his distance, making whatever excuse he could, but with Vector watching him like a hawk (seriously, what was up with that?), there wasn't much he could do. So he had eaten and eaten, and now here he was: 26 hours into a 2 day fast, nearly bed-bound.

His ancestors had gone days without eating while observing the enemy, Vector had sacrificed meals upon meals when cases slowed down, and Espio was a day in— and couldn't think without summoning a migraine. He'd punish himself, but even raising up was a challenge.

Finally, Espio pulled down the cover, forcing himself into a sitting position.
"Fine."

The endless pleas came to a halt as Charmy beamed, wings fluttering faster than before. "Oh, thank you, Espio! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

The bee's glee brought a smile to his face, despite the headache it promised. Espio forced his feet onto the freezing hardwood floor, every part of his body pitifully aching. He opened his closet door and pulled out a gray, fuzzy shower robe.

Charmy snickered behind him, to which Espio glared. "Sorry, Espio. Why'd you put that on anyway?"

Espio gave the most nonchalant shrug he could muster. "It's a little chilly, that's all. Do you want to play or not?"

Charmy's cheers followed him down the hall as he racked his brain for a low-energy game.

5.

"Alright, you two, you know the drill. Charmy, you fly to the back— don't let anyone catch you. Espio, you go invisible, grab the scroll, and get the hell outta' there. While you guys are doing all that, I'll distract them." Vector grabbed both of their shoulders, looking at them with those determined eyes that always snapped them into reality. "We're in, and we're out. No funny business."

Espio gave the briefest of nods before turning on his heels and dashing the other way. He traversed through tight passageways, leapt in the shadows, and by the time the scroll was in sight, he could hear Vector slamming through metal.

Taking a minute to catch his breath, Espio observed the scene in front of him. Sandy walls surrounded him on every side, with grains hitting the ground every so often. Six dark, armored robots stood guard around a small white pillar, on it a scroll lying gracefully under a glass case.

The thinly spread guards made for a quick enough endeavor, something he'd have to thank Vector for later. With only one thing left to do, Espio took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and focused on becoming nothing.

...And opened his eyes to purple scales.

It was a common misconception that turning invisible took the same effort as turning green or red. While turning another color was fairly easy (and often accidental), becoming invisible took an incredible amount of concentration. It required a clear mind and intense focus— something his brain didn't seem to be handing out at the moment.

With hands clenched, Espio closed his eyes for even longer, smiling when he opened his eyes to see the sand below him. As he slowly crept forward, he tried to block out the angry yells just one room over.

Vector would be okay— of course he would. This wasn't their first fight with Eggman's soldiers, and the crocodile had chomped enough of them to taste oil for life. Still, why couldn't they have fought them together? It'd definitely put his mind at ease, and maybe his stomach would stop flipping.

...Or maybe not. It was embarrassing to admit, but his stomach hadn't shut up in days. It seemed like every 10 minutes it was growling, bringing pain and hot flashes with it. In an act of complete betrayal, his stomach had loudly grumbled in the car ride here— right after he had told Vector he wasn't hungry. (And, of course, Charmy just had to make a fuss about it.)

Now that he was thinking about it, how was he gonna play that off? He had eaten three meals yesterday, and while they all fit into his calorie deficit, there was no way he was repeating that today. (Not that tracking numbers was a regular thing, because it wasn't like that, *it wasn't*). Maybe Vector would just forget about it? No, no way, not after Espio had blatantly lied to him. He supposed he could—

Espio paused as a couple grains of sand landed on his face, tickling his nose. He raised a hand to brush them off, the soft beige clashing with his deep purple—

The realization hit him just a second too late as cold metal crashed into his side, sending him to the floor. Pain seared through his whole body as his mind raced too fast, vision a blur of sand and black. Hands desperately pushed on the ground, looking for any leeway, only for something to shove him back down.

Tiny red irises peered down at him as the other robots came closer and closer. Espio squirmed, pulling at the hand on his chest, but the machine's grip was bruising. In an automated voice, the being sounded out, "Threat detected. Preventative action must be taken." The robot raised its free arm, and once it was all the way up, detonated long, thick claws. Espio wheezed in something short and high-pitched, clenching his eyes shut —

A sharp growl emanated from above him as the pressure on his chest released. Something clanged detrimentally against the wall, and Espio finally found it in him to squeeze open his eyes. Through the cloud of sand, Vector was slinging the machines all across the room, biting the ones that got too close. He ripped one in half, wiping the sweat of his brow, making eye contact with Espio.

"Go! Get out of here!" The yell pulled Espio out of his trance and onto his feet. Ignoring the tremble in his legs, he made it over to where the scroll had fallen. He nearly fell as he picked it up, racing towards the exit.

Black dots blurred his vision as his feet threatened to give out and he had *failed*. He had failed, and Vector wouldn't tell him so, because he was kind, or Espio was weak, or maybe both, but he had. He was slow, and distracted, and a horrendous teammate, and he didn't deserve dinner.

And after a night full of terrors and apologies, maybe he didn't deserve breakfast either.

6.

Hot water dripped down Espio's body as the sound bounced off the shower mat. Colors ricocheted bright and warm as his head pounded, awake in an uncanny manner. His stomach felt overly full, and Espio wanted to rip his skin off.

He had binged. *Again*.

The day had started off good, with him having low-fat yogurt, strawberries, and a green tea for breakfast. He had burned it all off within the hour, had been doing so well, and then Vector had declared a movie marathon in the living room. And when Charmy had brought him his bag of popcorn, smiling so egregiously large it hurt, Espio decided that one bag would be okay. But really, it was a Saturday, and he had been so good all week— why not treat himself to some chocolate as well?

2 bags of gummies, half a bag of Funyuns, a handful of chocolate chips, and half a pint of ice cream (not even the Halo Top he had begged Vector for last week— *the Ben & Jerry's*). That is what he had managed to consume in the last 3 hours, and he had only stopped when Vector had looked at him, disgust and pity written all over his features. "You... You might wanna slow down, Es. I don't want you getting sick or anything."

Sick. With acid burning the back of his throat and the sudden sugar attacking his senses, he sure did feel sick. The water that was meant to wash away the guilt was doing anything but, amplifying the shame. He was desperate, and mad that he was desperate, but desperate nonetheless; he'd do anything to make the voice stop.

And, something sickeningly sweet reminded, he could.

The idea spun around his head a few times, and his first thought was to reject it. Espio had considered it, sure, but it was a terrible idea. It'd damage his throat, decay his teeth, sour his breath, and it showed lack of discipline. Ninjas didn't need to throw up after dinner.

...But which was worse? Accepting that you couldn't control yourself and waiting for the sludge to pile on, or take a controversial method to make yourself pure again? Espio wasn't sure, but the one that avoided weight gain was much more tempting.

Besides, this was only temporary— and anything was okay in moderation.

So, Espio let the mat leave painful indents on his knees and shoved two fingers to the back of his throat, tickling his uvula. He gagged once, then twice, tears blurring his vision— and then he spilled. The taste was sweet and salty and strangely hot, enough to elicit a natural gag. His stomach clenched with painful spasms at every hurl as Espio closed his eyes, feeling the vomit slide down his hand.

Once he felt like he had emptied all he could, he forced himself up on shaky legs, looking down at the crime scene below. It was brown and cloudy with little chunks embedded within, and it should have disgusted him. Somewhere deep down he knew that he should feel revolted, but he didn’t. All he could feel was relief at the emptiness.

Espio continued washing off, making sure that everything went down the drain, trying his best to ignore the ecstasy of a one time thing.

7.

Well, this was bad.

Espio gagged as the scent hit his nose, bringing tears to his eyes. Okay, scratch the previous statement— this was mortifying.

Espio eyed the brown stain on his floor, mind running so fast he was drawing blanks. Had he... Had he just shit himself? The words felt crude even entering his mind, but the evidence in front of him didn't lie. This was... This was *insane*! He hadn't had an accident since he was 6— *he was 17*!

Espio shuddered, feeling unbelievably gross and dirty. He had eaten a small lunch a few minutes ago and was having some cramps, so he decided to hunker down in his room until they passed. He was meditating to pass the time when the feeling hit him like a freight train. It had happened so quickly he hadn't had the chance to sit up.

Harsh and sudden, a sob overtook Espio, nearly doubling him over. His backside was cold and wet, his room smelt like shit, and everything hurt. He wanted nothing more than to sleep

and wake up feeling energized and alive. Part of him never wanted to feel hungry again.

Espio sniffled and wiped his eyes, clenching his fists. *No*. There wasn't a single journey out there without its challenges. All of this was a lesson that he had to learn from, and he'd be better off from it. More disciplined, more honorable, and more aware.

Feeling it all with a 5 second delay, Espio walked to his wardrobe and pulled out a pair of sweatpants, slipping them on. He'd take a shower, clean up the... mess, and it'd be like it never happened. And it certainly wouldn't again.

He'd be good, and then he'd be perfect.

8.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon!" Charmy chirped, pulling at Espio's sweater. "You're taking forever! I wanna go!"

Espio sighed, biting back jaded words. Instead, he pried Charmy's hand off him. "We'll go when I'm ready! If you keep complaining, we may not go at all."

Charmy pouted, deflated but undeterred. "When are you going to be ready?"

Espio rolled his eyes, heading to where they kept their shoes by the door. "I just have to get my shoes on, Charmy. Go see what Vector's doing."

Park day. Stupid, stupid park day. This was a calculated move on Vector's part, he was sure of it. It was hard enough going through missions in his current condition— now he had to go out on his days off too? He couldn't manage to fall asleep until 3 that night, stomach screaming the whole way through. Exhaustion racked his body, and the Headquarters suddenly being made of ice didn't help either.

Espio paused, foot hovering over his shoe. Had he... forgotten to put on socks? It was such a strange thing to overlook that Espio almost laughed, the energy fizzling out before it got to his throat. He was going to have to walk all the way to his bedroom and ruffle through his wardrobe for a pair of socks, and then he was going to have to sit down and put them on. It was enough to make him wish he had faked the stomach flu.

Espio took one step forward before it hit him, causing him to grip the wall. The world was spinning much too fast, and his eyes couldn't seem to focus on any particular thing. His legs felt like they were standing on another planet and everything was wavy. Nausea came over him in thick, overwhelming waves, which had him gagging over the shoes. Unnatural blinding heat rushed all over him as his body broke out into a clammy sweat, heart beating through his chest. Black started in the corners of his eyes, slowly closing in as something began ringing in his ears. The world completely faded to black as his body went limp, landing with a thud.

"—Es! ...ay!? Wha..."

His eyelids felt so, so heavy. Where was he?

"I... know! He was... shoes.. I don't..."

Charmy? He sounded so scared— why? Weren't they going to the park?

"Espio!" Scaly hands shoved at his shoulder, finally willing his eyes open. Vector was looking down at him, eyes wide like he had seen a ghost.

One glance at Charmy and Espio's heart was ready to burst. The bee was shaking and holding himself, bottom lip trembling. His eyes were full of tears threatening to spill, and he was looking at Espio with the most torn expression.

Espio tried to push himself up, needing to tell them that he was okay, that there was nothing to worry about— before ultimately falling back at the sudden hot flash and rising vomit. Vector quickly put a hand on his forehead, stroking gently.

"Ay, it's alright. You're alright," he soothed, though Espio could hear the shake in every syllable. "You... You passed out for a second there, bud. We're just gonna stay here for a minute until you get a little more awake, then I'll get you some water. Can you think of any reason you might've dropped?"

Shit. Shit, shit, *shit*. Reality hit him hard and fast; no way he could tell Vector the truth, not when he was so close to his goals! Maybe he could say he got too hot? No, that wouldn't work. Maybe he could claim dehydration? It'd be a stretch, but—

"It was my fault!" Charmy cried out, breaking Espio from his thoughts. "I— I was b-bothering him about the— the park when h-he was trying to— to get his shoes. I— I didn't think—" The boy broke into sobs, covering his face as he slowly descended to the floor. "I'm sorry, Espio! I'm s-so sorry!"

Espio watched Vector's horrified expression and Charmy's devastated one and felt himself getting sick all over again. He wanted to hold him, to wipe his tears, to do anything at all— but his body couldn't seem to move.

Espio closed his eyes.

9.

3 knocks echoed out on Espio's door. "Hey, Es. Can I come in?"

Espio forced himself up, body aching at the effort. Could he come in? He scanned the room for any trace of suspicious behavior, making a mental checklist. Hidden in the closet were his bags and laxatives, so he'd probably be fine. His room was, admittedly, less than clean, but he could explain that away.

"Yes, you may," he replied, leaning back on his headboard.

Vector walked in, pausing at the piles of clothes and empty water bottles around the room. Shame and embarrassment burnt Espio from the inside as Vector looked more and more confused. "I've... I've been meaning to clean up. It just... slipped my mind."

The crocodile looked at him, face turning from slight horror to pity, a tinge of amusement in the mix. "I get it, man. Nothing to turn red over, honest."

Espio looked down with a gasp, realizing that he had, in fact, turned red. He quickly forced himself back to purple as Vector sat down beside him. He looked at Espio with that same worried expression (Espio wanted to slap it off him), before cocking his head to the side. Confusion written all over his face, Vector reached over and picked something off of Espio's pillow.

"Is this— Are you losing scales?" Vector twisted the scale between his fingers, running it under the light.

Espio hugged himself tighter, gritting his teeth. This was his bedroom— what gave Vector the right to barge in here like he owned the place? "It's a normal occurrence in the summer. It's the body's way of staying cool."

Vector deadpanned, looking entirely unimpressed. "I'm a reptile too, Espio. Ain't no scales falling off me." Espio pushed down the urge to turn a different shade of red. Why did Vector have to interrogate him? Why couldn't he leave him alone? Again, Vector eyed him suspiciously. "And why are you wearing that hoodie anyway? It's eighty degrees outside."

Other than the occasional hot flash, his body seemed hellbent on slowly freezing to death— not that Vector needed to know that. Espio gave the most nonchalant shrug he could muster. "It gets colder in my room than other places in the house."

Vector stared at him, expression unreadable. Disbelief? Sadness? Fear? Espio couldn't tell anymore. He just really, really wanted to be left alone. Instead, Vector cleared his throat, positioning himself closer to Espio.

"Did I ever tell you about my rock bottom in Downunda?"

Espio ran through his memories, biting his lip. As they had gotten closer, Vector had revealed some things about his life in Downunda— none of them pretty. "I don't think so, no."

Vector sighed, something solemn and bitter in his eyes. "When I was fourteen, I got placed back into my mother's care."

Espio's eyes blew wide. He knew about Vector's abuse at the hands of his mother, and the years it caused him to spend in foster care. He never knew he had to return.

Vector seemed to pick up on his surprise, letting out a chuckle. "Yeah, I know. It wasn't for long— maybe a year? But it definitely felt longer." He let out a sigh. "I had grown some muscle, and I could throw some punches. That's what a few years in the system'll do to you. That... was not the best news for my mother, who wanted nothing more to shove me into a few walls. And she did, of course she did— but this time she was getting shoved back."

He stared off into the distance, biting his lip, before taking a quick intake of breath. "So, I come home one day after hanging out with the Freedom Fighters, and mom's sitting at the table with this big grin on her face. I sit down, and she tells me that, since I like to fight so much, she's found a solution. She pats me on the back and says to be ready for tomorrow night, and I'm like, what the hell does that mean?"

"Well, the next night, there's an old blue camaro in the driveway, and mom's flirting up a storm with the man in the driver's seat. He sees me, smiles, and goes, 'is that the one?'. My mom tells me to go ahead and get in the truck, and I do. We drive for a good thirty minutes down some back-roads, where we finally end up at this abandoned building. I can hear cheering and laughing from inside and when we finally enter, there's this big crowd just drinking and yelling."

"We make our way to the center, and there's—" Vector took a shaky breath, clenching his fists. "There's this young boy, maybe even younger than I was, just wailing on another boy. There's blood everywhere and he just keeps hitting the kid below him, and— and I don't think the other kid was *even awake*. It was so— so *awful*, and I couldn't understand why nobody was doing anything, and that's when mom's friend placed a hand on my shoulder. Leaned down and told me to get ready, 'cause I was next."

Espio's mouth was dry and agape. He had no idea that Vector had gone through something so... *atrocious*. His mind ran through all the insensitive things he had said without knowing, kicking himself for his carelessness. "I— I'm so sorry, Vector. I... I had no idea."

Vector shook his head, tears glistening in his eyes. "It's over now, that's what matters. The point to all of this was that it was completely out of my control. There was nothing I could do about... the fighting, so I started looking for other things I *could* control. I started eating foods I deemed as healthy, and only foods I deemed as healthy. It got to the point where I would only eat foods if they had a certain amount of protein, and even fruit was off limits. I made myself exercise for 6 hours a day minimum. I pushed away all my friends, completely isolated myself, and if anything went off course, I freaked out."

Espio bit his lip, unsure of what to say. "I... I'm... That's terrible. You were just a kid. You shouldn't have had to do any of that."

Vector smiled at him, something sweet and sad. "No, I shouldn't have. What happened to me was... bad. Really bad. And starving only made it worse." He looked Espio in the eyes. "Just like it's making life worse for you."

Espio's head spun, heart speeding up. There was— *what*? That wasn't fair, catching him off guard like that! "W-What? I'm not— I'm not *starving myself* if that's what you're implying."

Vector didn't even look mad, which only made it so much worse. "Es, you're losing your scales. You can barely walk to the bathroom without falling over, and you've been wearing that hoodie for three days. Not to mention the showers right after you actually eat —"

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Espio spat out, much too defensive and much too angry to care.

His shoulders drooped as his face turned to a frown. "If you think I don't know what Russell's sign is, you're wrong."

Every part of his body was tense, and he was losing it, losing it— "I'm not— I'm not sick! I eat when I want to! Just because I don't eat all the time doesn't mean I'm— I'm *anorexic* or anything."

"What have you eaten today?" Vector questioned all too smoothly.

Yeah, like he was gonna get him that easily. Espio laughed. "A bowl of cereal, if you have to know. Now—"

"We ran out of milk two days ago."

Espio felt himself go all sorts of cold, hands clamming up. *Stupid*, how could he be so *stupid*? Vector placed a hand on his shoulder, warm and comforting and wrong.

"This is a sinking ship, Espio. Please let us help you." His smile was kind and pleading.

Espio thought about his binge 2 days ago, the ways his thighs jiggled when he walked, his lack of stamina during training— "I don't need help."

Vector slowly retracted his hand with a sigh, pushing himself off the bed. With a grimace and a furrow in his brow, he looked back at Espio.

"You're off the team."

10.

"This isn't to punish you, y'know."

Espio scoffed, doing anything but meeting his eyes. After Vector had laid out the news, he had reiterated himself: Espio was not so much off the team as he was on paid administrative leave. *"Just until we can get your eating back in check,"* he had said, like he hadn't just ripped apart Espio's whole word.

"Sure it isn't. When are you guys leaving?" Espio stared daggers into the couch's armrest, holding back a scream. Today was the Chaotix's first mission without him, and wasn't that a horrid pill to swallow? It'd probably go well, so well that they move his leave to permanency —

Vector sighed. "Just as soon as Charmy gets his jacket on." And as though the words had summoned him, a familiar buzz filled the living space.

Though he was hellbent on ignoring them until they left, he could feel Charmy's big amber eyes peering into him. "Um... Espio... I know you're sad that we're going out without you, but we can still have lots of fun later! We could do a— a movie night!"

Espio clenched his fists, willing back tears. He was nowhere near strong enough for movie nights. "Yeah, maybe."

The silence stretched on for what felt like millenniums before Vector gave a final huff, evidently patting Charmy on the shoulder. "Alright, kid, head to the car. We'll be back soon, Espio. I want to talk to you later."

Espio chuckled something mean. He wasn't sure what else he could pry from him, but of course he wanted more. "Of course you do."

He had hoped Vector would've taken the bait, would've given him some mean words to chew on. Unfortunately, the only sound that came was the slamming of the front door and the ever-present growling of his stomach.

Espio put his hands over his eyes and pressed until he saw stars. Ninjas were honorable and sneaky, and Espio had been so conspicuous that he had been kicked off the team. The Chaotix struggled to make ends meet as it was, and Espio had been such a liability that Vector had taken him off anyway. Vector thought he was weak, and he truly was. Espio wanted nothing more than to starve to death on that couch.

... For about 3 minutes, anyway. Espio sat up, something entirely bitter and spiteful and enthusiastic boiling in his gut. Before, his binges always had to be carefully set up, and were never fully satisfactory. Now he had at least a few hours to eat whatever he wanted— and to taste it twice.

Espio stumbled into the kitchen, laughing as he opened the cabinets. Maybe this wasn't so bad after all— he'd be the best version of himself soon, and he'd enjoy life in the meantime. Have fun interrogating that, Vector!

Within 45 minutes, Espio had consumed 2 bowls of cereal, a container of strawberries, a string cheese, half a bag of tortilla chips with salsa, and a granola bar, and was already hovering over the toilet. Espio choked on a laugh as his fingers entered his mouth, adrenaline and sugar rushing through his veins. This was only the beginning, and the freedom of it all made him feel like he could fly.

It took much longer for his gagging to produce anything, despite him feeling puckishly full. It took another 2 minutes before success came, but when it did, cloud 9 didn't begin to describe it. Tears ran down his face as the mixture of tastes came up, as well as the sharpness of the chips. He retched as loudly as he wanted, for as long as he wanted, and when he finally felt empty, he let himself cough and hack.

He rinsed his hands, getting all the chunks off, noting somewhere that his pupils were unusually dilated. Espio swung open the door, smile sky high—

And froze as his gaze met Vector's horrified, broken expression and Charmy's tearful, shaking frame.

1.

The first week of recovery was actually hell— so bad, in fact, that Espio wasn't sure it really counted.

He had been so panicked when he had opened that door, so desperately remorseful that he was willing to nod along to anything that was asked of him. Eating three meals a day? Sure, he could manage that. No showering an hour after a meal? That was absolutely fine.

It was only after eating a full breakfast the next day (blueberries and waffles, once a comfort food) that Espio realized that he was absolutely *not fine*. He was so incredibly full and it made him feel gross, like he was covered in grease.

While he was absolutely not allowed in the bathroom without supervision, he was allowed to go back to his room. So started the accumulation of vomit bags in his closet and under his bed, and the overwhelming aroma of Febreeze that just barely masked the smell. It went on like this for a while, with Espio smiling in Vector's face as he ate breakfast, and everyone else staying confused as to his continuous weight loss.

6 days into his routine, he vomited so hard it felt like his throat was tearing apart. In a blur of panic and regret, he came clean to Vector.

In the end, he had not actually torn his throat— rather, he had just irritated it to the point of swelling and agony. Still, the cat was out of the bag, and Vector had a whole other plan of action ready to go. Now, Espio had to stay in Vector's line of sight for an hour after dinner. If he had felt like an idiot before, he felt like a complete imbecile now.

The next morning had been greatly dreaded; So dreaded that Espio hadn't been able to sleep. His mind had conjured horrors of syrup and butter and all things sugar— so when Vector

came in with a list of options, he was... surprised to say the least.

Vector handed him the list with a sheepish look on his face. "I was thinking about it last night, and, well— When I was fourteen, I would've hated someone shoving a bunch of food in my face. You still gotta eat, but... I figured you'd appreciate the options."

It wasn't perfect, by any means— eating never would be— but the urge to puke afterwards wasn't quite as strong. It continued on like this, with Vector bringing him a list of options, and Espio getting his pick. The extra effort weighed heavily on Espio's conscience, but it worked. Mostly worked, anyway.

Gaining weight back was a strange, horrifying feeling that left him gasping nearly every time he thought about it. It wasn't like he could weigh himself on a scale— Vector had grown much too smart for that— but he could *feel* it. His arms were gaining back muscle, it didn't hurt to stand anymore, he wasn't freezing all the time— it made him want to wail.

It wasn't just the idea of failing as a ninja or a teammate— existing in a bigger body was a challenge in itself. While TV time was pretty much limited to cartoons and sports, Espio wasn't an idiot. Thin people were graceful, models, worthy of sympathy. Overweight people were slobs, pigs, uncontrollable burdens. There was already so much wrong with him, this would be the nail in the coffin.

And then one day, Charmy slammed down his spoon at dinner and declared that *he didn't want to eat anymore because he's fat*. The mere statement had Espio's head rolling around for a reasonable conclusion, and before he could even think of what to say, Vector was already asking *why, why would he think that?* And in response, Charmy crossed his arms, jutting out his bottom lip.

"Espio thinks he's fat, and I eat way more than him." Tears filled his eyes as he looked to the floor. "I must be really fat."

Anger came over Espio in a way he hadn't felt for a long time, strangling his spoon hard enough to shake. Suddenly, it didn't matter what society thought— all that mattered was Charmy wasn't eating and he couldn't go down this path, *he couldn't*.

Espio lifted the soup to his mouth, forcing it down with a gulp. He looked at Charmy, trying his best to mimic Vector's game face. "You're not fat, Charmy. And... And neither am I. I'm— I'm sorry that you had to see me lie to myself, but I was wrong. Please— Please eat with me."

The words rattled his chest, and he wasn't sure he entirely believed them, but Charmy finished dinner. Charmy finished dinner, and Espio could— *would* be okay with that.

The next time Espio truly slipped was after a nasty round of the stomach flu.

They weren't sure where exactly they had picked it up, or who had brought it in, but one thing was sure: They were all down for the count. Vector was nearly bed bound, Espio couldn't keep anything down (a problem in itself), but the worst of it all was Charmy.

The young bee always got it worse when it came to sickness, and this was no exception. Charmy was struggling to keep anything down, cried anytime he was alone, was fevering on and off, and hadn't moved off the couch in two days. Logically, Espio knew this likely wasn't his fault. He hadn't left the house in weeks, he couldn't have brought anything in. Still, the guilt gnawed at him, and the opportunity to fast was all too easy.

About 30 hours in, Vector walked into his room with 2 jello cups, sitting on his bed as he handed him a spoon. Vector opened his and began digging in. "This is one hell of a stomach bug, huh?"

Espio played with the lid, not opening it. "Yeah, it certainly is."

Silence echoed around the room as Vector chewed. "The kid's finally asleep. He hasn't fevered in six hours. I don't want to jinx it, but I think we might be out of the woods."

Espio's shoulders dropped as he let out a relieved sigh. He bit his lip, twiddling his spoon. He wanted to recover— he did. But Vector already knew *so much*, and he felt like a gaping wound.

...But Vector had opened up about his past for him, something that had obviously not been easy. Espio sighed. "It is... hard for me to... eat when Charmy is hurt. I feel like... like it is my fault."

Vector put his spoon down, nodding intently. With a deep breath, he pushed himself closer to Espio. "Alright, Es. Thanks for letting me in. Let's talk this out."

The conversation delved into tears (from both sides, strangely enough) and sharp breaths, and Espio felt seen. In the end, though he couldn't tell you how he did it, Espio finished his jello — as well as some saltine crackers.

2 weeks later, the dreaded conversation finally rolled in. The backup funds had allowed Vector and Charmy to stay at home, but they were beginning to run thin. Besides, if Charmy stayed inside another day, Espio thought he might explode.

Vector paced around Espio's room, looking entirely troubled. "It's— It's not that I don't trust you, Es, but it's early. I just— how can I best help you not to relapse?"

And Espio did believe him. He had finally opened up to Vector about the binges and the laxatives and the bags, and it felt like ripping himself open. He had half expected the crocodile to laugh, or to exclaim *ew* like a toddler. Instead, he had thanked Espio, embraced him in a hug, and helped him clean without a single complaint. He knew Vector trusted him — the real question was if he could trust himself.

Espio thought for a moment, tapping his foot on the bed. Every single time he had been left home alone he had binged, which wasn't the most promising. Eating regularly had a good chance of sending him binging, and restricting nearly guaranteed it. If there was just one food he could splurge on without spiraling—

Well, he supposed there was.

And that was how Espio ended up eating buttered noodles for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, while touching up on his kanji. It wasn't without its challenges— the 30 minutes spent hovering in the bathroom threshold made that clear— but he had done it. He had made it through a whole day without restricting or binging or purging, and when his teammates came home, he didn't have to lie. Not even a little bit.

Finally, Vector gave him a timeframe: If Espio could continue what he was doing for 2 more weeks, he could try being back on the team. A trial run, of sorts.

It was as exhilarating as it was terrifying. Of course, it had been all Espio had dreamed of since Vector broke the news. Beyond his true passion in mysteries, hanging out with Vector and Charmy was a comfort that he had taken for granted. Having it forced out of his hands had left a void he wasn't quite able to fill, no matter how many butter noodles he consumed. It was everything he wanted.

On the other hand, there was a small part of his mind whispering that this was a bad thing. As painful as it had been, there had been a small rush of excitement at being kicked off the team. It meant that someone had seen him struggling, and that it was enough to cause concern. It was a kick he couldn't quite get from anything else, and in his darker times, he missed it. The idea of letting it go had him wanting to skip lunch altogether.

But there were moments he could not forget: Vector learning how to use a computer so he could better understand his illness, Charmy bringing him a 'Thank You' card for eating dinner 3 days in a row, Vector's face when Espio finally accepted he needed help— It would get easier.

And harder. But ultimately easier.

Until then, Espio would take it one meal at a time.

End Notes

woop woop woop it is finally finished ! This was supposed to be a fun little writing challenge to get me back in the swing of things, and in true AO3 fashion it ended up being 8k words. Still, I've been meaning to write an ED centered one-shot for a while and this has been a really fun challenge! I really wanted to dive into the more grotesque parts of having an ED + be as realistic as I could. This is also my first time writing Espio as the MC, so I hope i did him justice lol

I hope you enjoyed, and I hope to see you next time! :]

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!